



Dana E. Blackwell
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **June 19, 2006**, at the Kinship Resource Center at 5035 West Slauson Avenue, Suite G, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Helen A. Kleinberg
Ann E. Franzen
Susan F. Friedman
Daisy Ma
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Rev. Cecil L. Murray
Sandra Rudnick
Dr. Harriette F. Williams
Stacey F. Winkler

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry
Hon. Joyce Fahey
Wendy L. Ramallo
Adelina Sorkin

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES

Jason Anderson
William Johnson

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the June 19, 2006, meeting was unanimously approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the June 5, 2006, general meeting were unanimously approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT

- On behalf of the Commission, Chair Kleinberg expressed appreciation to the staff of the Kinship Resource Center for hosting today's meeting, and to the Commission's executive director, Dana Blackwell, for organizing it.
- Ms. Blackwell has accepted a position in Supervisor Burke's office and will be leaving the Commission in mid-August. The Personnel Committee will meet this afternoon to discuss a job description and position announcement, and expects to be interviewing for the executive director post during the summer.
- The department's LOG meeting last Friday regarding the Title IV-E waiver was productive, clarifying that the waiver does not furnish new money, but rather allows the use of old money in different ways to achieve desired outcomes for children and families. Demographics and needs will be studied in each service planning area, and community meetings will be held on the reworking of these dollars.
- At the recent Children's Law Center youth meeting—also attended by the newly formed Blue Ribbon Taskforce from the state—the young people in attendance were very articulate, particularly on the subject of psychotropic medication and needing more information on their rights when it is not helping them. The meeting was hosted at Occidental College, with the youth spending the weekend in on-campus dorm rooms, for a mini-college experience.
- Chair Kleinberg congratulated all who participated in Celebration 06 on June 15, and regretted being unable to attend.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Dr. David Sanders presented background on four initiatives on which the kinship division is currently focusing.

- The Wheeler lawsuit is a class action filed about a year and a half ago, alleging that Los Angeles County was not appropriately assessing relative homes where children were placed. The county settled a year ago, agreeing that it would comply with state and Federal laws regarding home approval, and that it would report to the plaintiffs on specific measures. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires that the homes of relatives and non-related extended family members be assessed and reassessed in the same way that foster homes are.
- ASFA compliance is required to generate Federal Title IV-E funds, but Los Angeles County has fallen behind in its annual reassessments. Because of this, net county cost has been funding placements where the relative reassessments have not occurred. To complete the outstanding reassessments, departmental staff have been reassigned and overtime has been authorized. Part of the issue, Dr. Sanders said, is that the state pays for reassessments on the basis of their taking about 3 hours to perform, while DCFS is finding that a thorough reassessment takes between 11 and 13 hours. Through the

Child Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), the county may approach the state about this gap, but in the meantime, county dollars continue to be spent.

- A recent Board of Supervisors motion on the monitoring of foster family homes and state-licensed foster homes—submitted by Supervisors Antonovich and Knabe and amended by Supervisor Molina—requested that the department report back in 30 days on the feasibility of moving the administration of relative caregiver placements to private foster family agencies (FFAs). Supervisor Molina in particular is interested in overall equity in the use of out-of-home care. The department now has 11,000 children placed with relatives, 6,000 in FFAs, and 2,000 in state-licensed foster homes, and payment and oversight is different for all three systems.

FFAs are paid a set amount for each child (\$1500 to \$1800 monthly); they in turn pay foster homes \$500 to \$800 per month, and FFA social workers make weekly visits to the families to provide support. The basic rate for a relative caregiver is about \$500 per month, but if a child is identified as a D or F rate child, the payment is significantly higher—\$1100 to \$1200 for D rate children, and higher for F rate. No structural way exists for relative caregivers to move to being under FFAs, and DCFS's report to the Board will say so. If the supervisors asks the department to pursue the idea further, a long planning process will be involved.

- Joan Smith reported on issues surrounding 388 petitions, when funding streams change from Kin-GAP (Kinship Guardian Assistance Payments) to foster care. To begin with, Kin-GAP is a prospective payment—made on June 1, for example, for the month of June—while foster care payments are retroactive, with the check for June not being dated until July 15. Caregivers making the switch must be prepared for that time lag. ASFA regulations also kick in, a home approval is needed, and other coordination issues arise as well. Rose Belda from County Counsel is waiting for clarification from the state on situations when a parent files a 388 petition on a Kin-GAP case and the court opens the case only to hear the motion, but not to order services. Can the money keep flowing until the motion has been heard?

Kinship Resource Center staff members reported some clients who have been told they are no longer eligible for Section 8 housing because of their Kin-GAP income. Staff have worked with the housing authority to inform its personnel about Kin-GAP—which they erroneously assumed was similar to adoption assistance—and have received assurances that this mistake will no longer be made. The housing authority will send specific language to be used in relative caregiver training, the centers will develop a handout about correct procedures, an announcement will be distributed to all social workers, and division chief Michael Gray will issue an F.Y.I. on the subject. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) may generate the same Section 8 problems, and Chair Kleinberg suggested working with the housing authority to circumvent those before they happen.

Commissioner Biondi asked about children in foster care or relative care who go into the probation system; when they return and are 'suitably placed' by the court, is fund-

ing available for that placement? The last group home report, she said, showed no kin receiving payments. A representative from the Alliance for Children's Rights said that the Probation Department handles the home approvals in these cases, and the child qualifies for Youakim payments. A breakdown often happens when probation staff fail to recommend 'suitable placement' or if the judge does not order it. Camp staff are also often unaware of Youakim requirements, and relative legal guardians are getting billed for children who are sent to camps.

KINSHIP SUPPORT DIVISION ACTIVITIES

Commissioner Williams, chair of the Commission's relative care committee, praised the progress made over the last 10 years in developing a clear community of support for relatives, and thanked Dr. Sanders, the department, The Community College Foundation, the Alliance for Children's Rights, and the caregivers themselves. The creation of the kinship support division was a big step in the right direction, although challenges remain—budgeting appropriate staff, training, and the yearly reassessment of 11,000 relative homes.

Angela Carter, the deputy for relative care, said that working with relatives and non-related extended family members who provide homes for children is one of the most important partnerships the department has. The kinship division bears the regulatory responsibility of home assessments, both initially and annually, but its overall vision is to support and offer resources to relatives.

Division chief Michael Gray distributed a packet of material that included an organizational chart noting additional staff to be hired; he also mentioned the need for bilingual staffing, particularly in the Antelope Valley area. A status report for the division as of March 2006 indicates a 45 percent increase in initial assessment referrals, from 3,803 received from March 2004 through January 2005 to 5,505 received from March 2005 to January 2006. From January 2005 through March 2006, 143 assessments out of about 5,500 were denied for reasons that included:

- Incomplete criminal clearances (34 percent)
- Criminal records with no exemptions (22 percent)
- Inadequate space (20 percent)
- Caregiver qualifications (16 percent)
- Unsafe homes (7 percent)
- Lack of cooperation (1 percent)

A centralized process for reviewing criminal offense exemptions has been in place since June 1, and Mr. Gray is responsible for analyzing all crime information and consulting regulatory guidelines before granting an exemption. (For example, a DUI 10 years ago with no further offense in the past 24 months would qualify for an exemption, as would a felony theft 45 years ago with no further offense in the past five to seven years.) Live-Scan clearances are required for all adults living in the home at the time of the initial assessment, and records are accessed through the Juvenile Automated Index (JAI) for juvenile offenders 14 and older whose criminal history might pose a risk to a child. The kinship division relies on case-carrying workers, since they visit the home every month,

for information on anyone who moves in subsequent to that time. Unfortunately, union negotiations preclude case-carrying workers from assisting with the annual reassessments of the home, but they can be the division's 'eyes and ears.' Dr. Sanders agreed with Commissioner Biondi's comment that annual reassessments hold relative homes to a higher standard than group homes (which are evaluated every other year), saying that the state structure requires more frequent visits to relative caregivers than to other providers.

Commissioner McClaney asked about adjustments for different cultural perceptions of 'adequate space,' and Mr. Gray explained that regulations define the number and gender of persons allowed in a single room, and that the division often helps families get separate beds or otherwise change the sleeping structure to meet those standards. Three young brothers, for example, could share a room as long as each had his own bed.

Assistant regional administrator Michelle Saulters detailed a new placement's sequence of events: the kinship division receives a referral from a regional office's case-carrying worker regarding a child placed with a relative or nonrelated extended family member. A division worker performs an initial assessment, including an on-site inspection of the home, criminal background checks for everyone living there, an evaluation of caregiver qualifications, and an orientation. The division's goal is to visit the home within five to seven days of referral (over the six assessment units, that timeframe is now averaging 16 days) and to have the assessment complete within 30 days. Delays may occur if additional adults need LiveScan clearances, if JAI records must be pulled, or if a caregiver has limitations because of medical conditions or the special needs of the child.

Once the home is initially approved, an annual reassessment takes place within 365 days. The division's goal is to visit the home with plenty of time before that deadline, since it is finding that many homes alter considerably in a year—more adults may be living there, the child may no longer have his or her own room—and the reassessment may be essentially starting from square one.

Barbara Barabino said that the Kinship Resource Center handles an average of 25 to 30 calls a day with questions about finances, legal proceedings, housing, child care, respite care, and education. At least 35 percent of those calls are not from caregivers with open cases, but from members of the community—a reminder to the department that not all support is case-driven, and that perhaps the new Title IV-E flexibility can create ways to help families prevent problems and stay out of the system. About 20 percent of center calls, Ms. Barabino said, are from caregivers who want to open a case with the department to access financial help through Youakim payments. Because the children are already in a safe home, no case can be opened, but callers are informed about other resources for assistance. If callers report child abuse, they are referred to the hotline.

Center staff are committed to providing relative caregivers the support and resources they need to enhance their children's growth, and to giving them the respect and dignity they deserve. The center sponsors a monthly support group and staff make home visits, talk with case-carrying social workers, help with the removal of a child if that becomes necessary, talk to caregivers about permanency options, bring in adoption workers for in-depth

explanations, and make presentations on relative care to departmental training academies, regional offices, and service planning area (SPA) councils. In answer to Commissioner Biondi's question about children's trust fund support to the center, Mr. Gray said that he wasn't sure, but it was probably little if any.

STAFF TRAINING

Dr. Yolanda Green from California State University Long Beach reviewed the collaboration between CSULB and The Community College Foundation to establish a training program for DCFS line staff who deal with kinship caregivers. Since June 2005, 700 social workers and 2,005 social work supervisors and administrators have been trained in a model that focuses on the strengths of the family, on partnerships and teamwork between the family and the social worker, and on ensuring that the child's needs are met.

The interactive training introduces the nine major issues of concern that require collaboration between social workers and kinship caregivers:

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ▪ Legal status | ▪ School | ▪ Support services |
| ▪ Finances | ▪ Child behavior | ▪ Fair and equal treatment |
| ▪ Health/mental health | ▪ Family relationships | ▪ Satisfaction and recommendations |

The five collaboration competencies are:

- Respecting the knowledge, skills, and experience of others
- Building trust by meeting needs
- Facilitating open communication
- Creating a process that respects cultural traditions, values, and diversity
- Using negotiation skills

The second half of the day-long training uses case studies to practice the nine issues and five competencies during the four phases of kinship care services:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Assessing the kinship family | 3. Supervising the placement |
| 2. Placing the child with kin | 4. Closing the case |

Because training is only as effective as the policy that directs it and the supervision that enforces it, all levels of staff are required to attend. An analysis of trainee responses found that participants considered the training valuable and their specific knowledge increased; in-depth interviews with trainees in the Pomona and Compton offices indicated that the training had been helpful in changing their perspective and practice.

KEPS TRAINING

Sylia Obagi from The Community College Foundation summarized the Kinship Education, Preparation & Support (KEPS) training for caregivers, which the department began in 1996 with a pilot designed by Zelma Smith, a master trainer from the Child Welfare Institute. Since then, 2,400 caregivers have gone through the 36-hour program, which is presented in 12 three-hour workshop modules that are offered throughout the county, to

be as accessible to and convenient for caregivers as possible. Placements where caregivers have gone through KEPS tend to be more stable, more likely to accept sibling groups and be near the children's original home, and more instrumental in preserving the child's original attachment to a caring adult.

Because caregivers have said that they want support, information, and a sense that they are not alone—rather than to be 'trained' in the traditional sense—KEPS uses a group-format process that encourages ongoing relationships among participants. Feedback from the majority of attendees indicates that it has changed their lives, and that they wish they had known about KEPS from the beginning of their children's placement. On average, KEPS participants have already had children placed with them for three and a half years before going through the program.

Ms. Obagi distributed a report on KEPS highlights and achievements, noting that over 1,500 individuals have participated from 2003 through 2006, with an average graduation rate between 63 and 66 percent. To date in 2006, the graduation rate is 84 percent. The program's goals are to consistently increase that rate, offer more classes in Spanish (a large group of Spanish-speaking facilitators have just been trained), expand into Asian languages, revamp the curriculum to include new initiatives and regulations, pilot the program within the Probation Department, increase the number of community locations where workshops are offered, and follow up with caregivers who are not graduating to find out why. In general, attendees do not finish the program because their homes were found ineligible for placement, or because of child care, transportation, or other logistical problems. Those who do graduate overwhelmingly score higher on their understanding of the reasons for their child's behavior, their options for permanency, where to go for support and services, the role of the DCFS social worker, and how to handle challenges.

Outreach for the program is done by five part-time kinship advocates hired by The Community College Foundation to inform caregivers and families, make presentations to regional offices, build relationships with DCFS staff, and generate awareness and referrals from community- and faith-based organizations, foster parent associations, and others. The foundation is hoping for a standardized approach in the regional offices to informing caregivers about KEPS, perhaps tied to the home assessment process.

KINSHIP PANEL

Assistant regional administrator Madeline Jackson introduced a four-member panel of kinship caregivers. Shirley Andy has had her nephew since he was three years old; his cerebral palsy has necessitated multiple surgeries, and he requires special education services. In Lancaster, where they live, the challenges of geography and distance are many, and families are sometimes resistant to seeking services or becoming involved until they are in crisis. Some social workers don't understand the needs of relative caregivers, especially those whose literacy skills may be low.

Susan Barkley-Jones has had her five grandsons nearly all their lives; most have mental health issues, having been fetally exposed to drugs and alcohol. As a KEPS trainer, what she sees constantly is the bad information—or none at all—that caregivers are given.

Funding is the primary issue, with kin being forced into adoption, Kin-GAP, or legal guardianship, she said, without the financial ramifications of those decisions being explained to them. They may later be faced with a closed case and a child whose special needs remain unmet, or an adopted child who cannot get independent living program (ILP) or Early Start to Emancipation Preparation (ESTEP) services. Relatives are told to apply for CalWORKs funding before they can receive Youakim payments, Ms. Barkley-Jones said, but licensed foster homes don't need to do that. Supplemental funding is based not on the child, but on the household, whose limited budget must then stretch to accommodate the newcomer. Licensed foster homes have the option to refuse a child, but relatives take children without question, because there is a blood bond.

Bureaucratic obstacles to assistance are plentiful, and unanswered questions abound. Ms. Barkley-Jones knows of families who have had children for six months without receiving a penny, and others who have children with no Medi-Cal cards after a year and a half. CalWORKs applications are denied, post-adoption services and respite care are nonexistent. Why do initial mental health assessments take so long? Nearly every displaced child has some kind of behavior problem, and caregivers need help with adjustments, going through the grieving process, and building a positive, respectful relationship with the child. Why is communication with the department so difficult, and rules so seemingly arbitrary? She herself spent a week and a half trying to telephone in reply to a DCFS letter, unable to get a response, and discovered only by calling the supervisor that the worker was on vacation. Because she is a KEPS trainer, she was told it was a conflict of interest for her to temporarily take in the child of another caregiver while that woman brought her home up to ASFA standards—even though the woman had no other options.

Ms. Barkley-Jones also asked how much Title IV-E waiver money will be allocated to relatives. Who's in charge of its distribution, and how soon can it be accessed? Joan Smith said that waiver dollars should start flowing as of January 1, 2007. The county's plan will be submitted this fall to the state, which will in turn submit the statewide plan to the Federal authorities. Planning for waiver monies is in the very early stages, and Chair Kleinberg suggested that relative caregivers agree on their priorities and lobby for them at the planning sessions to be held countywide. (Mr. Gray said that he was pulling together a meeting with caregivers to discuss that very issue.) Commissioner Biondi recommended that relatives also become knowledgeable about the rollout of the Mental Health Services Act, which will bring \$200 million a year into Los Angeles County. In addition, she suggested creating an ombudsman position for kin.

Calling them “the best natural resources” that exist for children, Commissioner Winkler expressed outrage over the barriers that relative caregivers encounter, and urged Commissioners not to leave today's meeting without hearing responses to the panel's concerns. Though some progress has been made in the last few years—the existence of the Kinship Resource Center itself being a huge step—too many caregivers still don't know where to get answers. Commissioners must continue to be alarmed, as in Ms. Barkley-Jones's example, that families are not getting their money in six months.

Maria Dickson gave an emotional recitation of her three-year struggle to find help for her two nephews, while also raising four of her own children, one with behavior problems. No one else would take her nephews, Ms. Dickson said, but for her, family comes first. No psychological help or therapy was offered to the family, school-related services were denied, and she was reluctant to ask social workers for help for fear she would be told she wasn't doing a good enough job with the boys and they would be taken away. When she called the hotline, she was told she couldn't be helped because her nephews' case was closed. Not until she found a KEPS class did she learn how to navigate the system, file petitions, apply for school benefits, and get individualized education plans for her children—finding out in the process that, because she is Latina and her children look white, school personnel had assume she was not their mother, but the maid.

Bonnie De La Cruz has raised her grandson, who has cystic fibrosis and is now nearly 17, since he was three. His condition prevented him from attending traditional child care, so she had to quit her job when he came to live with her. Initially, her biggest problem was isolation: he had an open case with DCFS, but was receiving SSI payments instead of Youakim, so she wasn't on the list to receive notifications of conferences or trainings. Friends didn't understand what she was going through, and she didn't know where to go or who to talk to. Up until a year ago, not one of her grandson's social workers knew what cystic fibrosis was, even though all came from a medical placement unit.

The sooner relative caregivers access resources, the better. At both the initial assessment and when they first go to court, Ms. De La Cruz suggested handing out pamphlets with phone numbers and information on resource centers where they can connect with support groups, meetings, conferences, and training. She went through the original KEPS pilot program, and believes that informing social workers about KEPS is vital. She hears from relatives being forced into permanent options; one woman has had a child only since October—she hasn't even received a Youakim payment yet—but the child's worker is already talking about terminating parental rights and adoption. (Ms. De La Cruz knows that post-adoption services are purported to exist, but she's never seen them.) She also hears from relatives being rushed into Kin-GAP prior to having had a legal guardianship for a year, as is required. Caregivers need to realize what they're giving up—what happens when the child is 16 and needs help? What happens when it's time for college, especially if there's a house full of children? If they've been adopted, it's too late for any assistance. Even though special-needs children may have their cases kept open to age 21—Judge Nash has said that the courts will not automatically terminate jurisdiction at 18—in the push toward permanency, social workers are still being pressured to close cases.

Now a KEPS trainer, Ms. Dickson hears about numerous children who have special needs, as hers do, and are going to need help for the rest of their lives, not just to age 21 or 22. Mrs. Andy's grandson, with cerebral palsy, is growing so fast that he needs new shoes every three to six months, as well as canes for walking and a new wheelchair, both of which she has had difficulty in obtaining. Ms. Dickson knows of a grandfather who modified his grandson's wheelchair with a piece of wood, not knowing that resources for

replacement or repair existed. Individuals are afraid to ask for help—especially in the Spanish-speaking community—because of the risk of the child’s removal. Chair Kleinberg suggested gathering information on resources for special-needs children, the kinds of requests being made on their behalf, and what funds are available to assist them.

The Kinship Resource Center’s Claudia Bustillo acknowledged the importance of bilingual staffing, and said that, particularly with the new immigration legislation being considered at the Federal level, Spanish-speakers are increasingly reluctant to give their names when they call for information. Many are undocumented individuals caring for children born here, but they would not be turned away from CalWORKs non-needy caregiver assistance. Ms. Bustillo has contacted the Department of Public Social Services, and CalWORKs representative Ricardo Torres will be accepting applications for that program at the center soon. Mr. Gray added that 14 CalWORKs liaisons are now stationed throughout DCFS regional offices; his division would like to see DPSS staff more knowledgeable about eligibility standards for relative caregivers, with a CalWORKs-dedicated social worker in DPSS to work with these families. Chair Kleinberg also mentioned the attendance of DPSS at team decision-making meetings, so that DPSS can become involved immediately when a child is placed with a relative.

Ms. Barkley-Jones asked for clarification on the eligibility requirements for Youakim payments and CalWORKs, which she says relatives do not understand. Youakim eligibility, Mr. Gray explained, is contingent on whether the birth parent is eligible for CalWORKs at the time the child is taken into custody. The system alerts CalWORKs when Youakim kicks in, Ms. Bustillo added, so caregivers may apply for both but will never receive two checks. (Ms. Barabino cited issues with amending birth certificates when names don’t match, and difficulties some caregivers have in persuading DPSS that they are actually related to the children they’re caring for.)

Ms. Obagi mentioned the opportunity the department has to assess the long-term impact of adoption by looking at the Adoption Promotion and Support Services (APSS) program her organization has initiated in SPA 6. Between half and three-quarters of the APSS caseload, she said, are kinship caregivers who are told they have to adopt.

Relative caregivers sometimes unexpectedly discover the existence of siblings, Ms. Barabino said, or find other children placed in foster homes. If individuals happen not to have been reachable when the hotline originally tried to locate a child’s relatives, should that relationship be allowed to dissolve? The family group decision-making process should catch those instances, Chair Kleinberg said, which is another point in favor of its use.

A plea was made for a kinship resource center in the Palmdale/Lancaster area, since families find the long trek for services and training daunting. A kinship support group there, dormant for the last four years, has re-formed and will meet monthly, and the area is active with various kinship appreciation activities.

Commissioner Winkler asked what tools would be offered to panel participants to get them the information and help they need, and Mr. Gray assured the Commission that all

four would be taken care of at the Kinship Resource Center. Commissioner Ma thanked the panel for their bravery in speaking out, and assured them that they had been heard. She said that she, too, would like to know the answers to their questions, to make sure that they are being helped. Commissioner Franzen echoed Commissioner Ma's gratitude, adding that she knows many individuals use their own money to accomplish good things in this arena, and they should be assisted.

Commissioner Williams formally recognized the four panel members, presenting each with a certificate of appreciation from the Commission thanking them for recognizing the importance of family for every child. She also presented a certificate of appreciation to the retiring Madeline Jackson for her championship of the voices of kinship providers, and for her dedication, determination, and perseverance.

Chair Kleinberg thanked Commissioner Williams for her continued work on the relative care committee, and encouraged other Commissioners to join that committee. She promised an ongoing focus on relative care, and a follow-up presentation in the future.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

MEETING ADJOURNED